





# Towards a History of the Bhils

## Introduction

These are days of "identity politics" – though I believe, and I think it is clear from the needs that people (including "Adivasis") express, that economic and "material" needs (such as control over lands, forests and natural resources) are also crucial. I am writing specifically about Bhils, since these are the major Adivasi community of the western India region we live in. They are spread throughout the bordering regions of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan. I think it is clear that they are the major community, and that smaller groups (such as the Pravaras in Maharashtra) are their offshoots, often more 'Hinduized' but with an origin in the same original ethnic group.

Today terminology – one aspect of identity politics – has become important. The Bhils I know – primarily those in Nandurbar district of Maharashtra who were earlier organised under the Shramik Sanghatana, but now associate with such loosely organised (or loosely disorganised) movements as Adivasi Ekta – object to terms such as "Vanavasi" and "Girijan" used by the BJP-RSS on the grounds that these are demeaning. They have in recent times favoured the term "Adivasi" – we are not simply forest dwellers and hill dwellers, we are the original inhabitants. Waharu Sonavane, a well-known poet in Marathi and Bhilori has formulated the logic behind this in his presidential



speech for the fifth Adivasi Sahitya Sammelan, held at Palghar in Thane District of Maharashtra in 1990.

....The birth of humanity took place in Africa. From that time up to around 10,000 years ago the entire human race lived a life as 'Adivasis.' That is, their life was dependent on the forest and nature. In that situation the human community reached up to nearly every corner of the earth. Its variety flowered. The basis of the variety that we see in human culture today was laid in the Adivasi condition.

After that, around 10,000 years ago, after agriculture was discovered, some tribes began to do agriculture. Among the varied Adivasi communities ( *jamaat* ) only a very few communities accepted the system of agriculture. Only, the population of those who began to do agriculture increased. Today they stand before us as the majority. Even then, it is necessary to be aware that in all these events among the varied traditions of the humanity ( *manav jati* ) only a very few traditions have been involved in this process. The main treasury of the variety of human culture and traditions has been maintained outside of agriculture. In Africa, in America and Asia, the Adivasis of the world have maintained it. This treasury has been maintained by Adivasis. It has been maintained throughout in their independent existence and also in their enslavement and exploitation. It has been maintained while living in the forests and after coming into agriculture. Because this Adivasi tradition has had many things worth keeping.

Speaking only of India, then the situation concerning Adivasis has come into Hindu culture. What is this

situation? how did it come about? there is some history to this.

Aside from Adivasis, the first culture that arose based on agriculture here was the Indus culture! These were people who lived on the banks of the Indus river and built cities and carried on settled agriculture in today's Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Pakistan and up to Afghanistan. It seems there was some degree of women's power in this Indus culture. There was also some degree of inequality. These people also had trade with the culture known as Mesopotamia far away through the ocean. It seems that they had a balanced exchange with the Adivasi community here.

After this the Indus culture was destroyed, and was buried in the stomach of earth and time. Wandering, warlike patriarchal Aryan tribes attacked it. Evidences of this attack are found in the Vedas. When the Aryan tribes in the Middle East came through the Khyber pass they were not far different from Adivasis. They lived through herding, collecting fruit and vegetables, and carrying on shifting agriculture with the help of digging sticks. Not only that, beef-eating, drinking were all acceptable to the Aryans of that time. They battled with other groups and among themselves over cattle. In Khandesh we still see the Kathiwaris coming with hundreds of cattle.

It appears from the Vedas that in the beginning, there was no great hierarchy among them. However a patriarchal culture was dominant among their tribes.

At the time, in other parts of India, free Adivasi tribes were living with culture of less inequality and more or

less matriarchal system. As the Aryan tribes began to move down the plains of the Ganga and Yamuna, many events took place.

A transformation began of conflict and synthesis among the indigenous Adivasis, the tradition of the Indus culture and the tradition of Arya speakers. Buddhism and Jainism were part of this transformation.

An alliance of a minority of Brahmins and a handful of Rajas, on the strength of their aggression, began to take the free Adivasi tribes one after another under their control and turn them into slaves and weaponless tax-paying toiling peasants; and settled them in villages in order to increase their kingdoms. Between the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, that is from the time of the Buddha, up to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, a strong balutedari caste hierarchy was established. Most of the free Adivasi tribes were turned into toiling castes (jatis) in a hierarchy in which they treated each other as inferior and gave surplus to the Rajas and Brahmins. By the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century AD the hierarchy established from this churning had stabilized. This was the society dominated by Brahmanic feudalism! It was a society with the capacity to slowly changing the Adivasi tribes and communities into castes, and bring them into its hierarchy but at the bottom level. We were those who confronted all this and remained outside!"

This is basically an argument that Adivasis were part of an original "indigenous" nonAryan community, and that they were the staunchest of the resisters of Aryan incursion (stauncher even than Dalits, who Phule saw as such). [note: Phule's version of the nonAryan theory identified the Mahars as the greatest foes

of the Aryans, deriving their name from Maha-aari, or "great enemy." This in itself also constitutes a narrative that has some problems, but I think it is on the whole a better one and more accurate historically than the identities implied by "varvasi" and "giri-jan."

It has one slight problem: that it identifies present-day communities who call themselves 'Adivasis' (basically, the Scheduled Tribes) with the pre-state "tribal" communities of thousands of years ago. It is time to turn to a question of terminology.

### Terminology

"Tribal" and "Scheduled Tribe" are the terms mostly widely used among English speakers for those who generally now call themselves 'Adivasis.' This is also a demeaning term, and inaccurate. "Tribe" implies a "backward" state of society – and this was certainly how they were seen by the British, and even by later Dalit leaders such as Ambedkar. It is a term rejected by the communities of the Northeast (Nagas, Mizos, Khasis, etc.) who have been called "Hill Tribes" but have insisted that they are "Hill Peoples." It is also rejected by indigenous communities throughout the world: today we speak of 'Native Americans' or the 'First Nations' of Canada – not of "tribes" or "Indians."

The Indian Adivasis who have been objecting to such terms as "varvasi" and "giri-jan" have rarely raised their voice against the English term "tribal" – largely because so few of them operate in English that it passes them by. However, in calling themselves "Adivasis" they are making the same kind of claim to original status as indigenous communities in other countries.

Sociologically and historically, the term "tribal" is highly inaccurate. First, we may note that before the time of the British,

classifications by Indians themselves rarely made such a qualitative distinction between forest- and hill-dwelling communities and those who were part of the caste society of the plains. The terms *jat* and *janaat* which are used today to express such a distinction have probably been imported. Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Phule – who distinguished clearly between 'Bahujans' and 'Dalits' with the concepts of *shudra* and *ati-shudra* – did not make such a distinction regarding those we now call Adivasis or STs. Rightly or wrongly, he simply included them in lists of communities/castes – *kunbi, mali, dhanger....koli, bhil, mahar, mang*.

Sociologically, the concept of a "tribe" has been used in the past to refer to a pre-state community, usually considered to be one with some minimal stratification (as contrasted with "band") and based on an economy of simple agriculture (horticulture or shifting cultivation) often combined with hunting and gathering, or of herding. Today this concept is rejected by social scientists as being too rigid. As the Harper-Collins *Dictionary of Sociology* puts it, tribe is

a concept developed by anthropologists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward that attempted to categorize one type of stateless society, generally on an evolutionary scale..but is now often seen as, at the worst, a European-imposed category that related inadequately to empirical reality, and, at best, a term around which no consensus exists" (Jary and Jary, 1991: 528).

Morton Friedman, one of the earliest anthropologists to question the "Concept of Tribe," argued that the notion of a group with closed boundaries did not accurately describe the situation before states arose, when populations were fluid and even groups identifiable in terms of regular kinship networks and

a common language/dialect quite often adopted and took in new members. A closed "tribe," he argues, could come into existence only after and in reaction to states.

Thus most recent sociology textbooks, for example, refer only to societies based on hunting and gathering, or on a horticultural and pastoral economy. For example, John Macdonald, author of the most-used text in the U.S., describes the average hunting and gathering society as having a population size of 25-40 people, and the average society based on horticultural and pastoral activities as having "settlements of several hundred people, interconnected through trading ties to form societies of several thousand people" (Macdonald, 1995: 104-5).

Obviously, it does not make sense to apply either the concept of a "tribe" or of a pre-state society based on horticulture etc. to such groups as the Bhils, Santhals, Munda, etc. who have populations in the millions. These may be more equalitarian communities than those longer exposed to the caste-feudal and capitalist societies, but they are not "tribes" in the sense in which sociologists and anthropologists have used the term, even in the past. The concept of "ethnic group," though much broader in application, appears more accurate. *The Dictionary of Sociology* defines it as

a group of people sharing an identity that arises from a collective sense of a distinctive history. Ethnic groups possess their own culture, customs, norms, beliefs and traditions. There is usually a common language; boundary maintenance is observed between members; and non-members and such groups are traditionally mutually exclusive. Typically, they are transgenerational and biologically self-perpetuating. Not all ethnic groups are endogamous, however, and membership may be

acquired through marriage or other socially approved routes" (Jary and Jary, 1991: 150).

The Bhils, then, could be seen as an ethnic group – one that is a significantly large one today and was evidently so (relative to others in the subcontinent) in the past. In this sense, it can be called an incipient nationality (a concept which the *Dictionary of Sociology* does not even attempt to define).

If we understand such large communities as ethnic groups with a significant existence over a long period of time, we are led to ask such questions as: What are their traditions? What is their history? What was their language, in the past and today? What typical literature and religious beliefs did they have and how have these developed over time? What are the relations they have had with the society around them, in the past, and what can be these relations today?

These are not questions that I have very full – or even satisfactorily partial – answers to. But they are questions that I think should be raised. I think they are useful questions, because they begin by recognizing that Bhils – perhaps like Gujarati-speakers, or Marathi-speakers, or Tamils, or Telegus – are a people who have for a relatively long time inhabited a particular territory, and can have some claim on it. This kind of claim has been forcefully raised (in a somewhat different way) in terms of new states such as Jharkhand and Chattisgarh. It also had some impact in the recent election in Madhya Pradesh when a Gondwana party sprang up which won two seats and made a decisive impact in dozens more – effectively depriving Congress of its base in the Gond areas and throwing the victory to BJP in that region. There has been a long-standing idea of "Bhilwara" in the Bhil areas, but it has never had much political impact. That is no reason to assume that it will not in the future. So let us



talk about the Bhils.

### Who were Bhils in Ancient Times?

#### *Bhils as Nisadas?*

The Bhils themselves, at least those in Maharashtra, believe that they are the group which was described in early Sanskrit texts as "Nisadas," of whom Ekalavya was the most famous representative. Many Bhils in Shahada area used to draw their bow with their thumb held back – as if in memory of this.

Nisadas are a group very much present in Sanskrit and Pali texts. A quite full account is given by Jha, who sees them as primarily hunters, and as one of the main indigenous groups that the Aryans came in contact with and confronted. He traces their changing status, noting that they became gradually treated as untouchables, though not to the degree that the Chandalas were; and notes also that their location in the various accounts of them shifts from the western UP area to the northeast (primarily in Buddhist texts) and later to the west and south (Jha, 1974: ).

Strikingly, however, there is no non-textual record – from inscriptions, or from accounts of Greek or Chinese travellers etc. that include any terminology similar to "Nisada."

However, there are some linkages of "Nisadas" with other, named groups. For example, Gustav Oppert, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar of Sanskrit, Tamil, Pali etc., notes that

"In the Aitareya Brahmana the Pulindas, together with the Andhras, Pundras, Sabaras and Mutibas, are declared to be the offspring of the cursed elder sons of Visvamitra, while, according to another tradition, they were descended from the dark-skinned, flat-nosed, and dwarfish Nisada, who had been produced by rubbing

the thigh of the corpse of the impious king Vena. The Pulindas are frequently mentioned in the classical language of India as well as in those of Europe..." (*On the Original Inhabitants of Bharatvarsha*, p. 86).

Bhils, thus, are in some way connected, not only with Nisadas but with "Pulindas."

*Bhils as Pulindas?*

Who are the Pulindas? They are a forest-dwelling group appear quite early in the historical record. In the Rock Edicts of Emperor Asoka, there is a mention of various ethnic groups or communities in the famous Edict XIII dealing with the conquest of Kalinga:

And this, the chiefest conquest in the opinion of His Sacred Majesty, that conquest of the Law of Piety which, again, has been won by His Sacred Majesty both here [in his own dominions] and among all his neighbours as far as six hundred leagues, where the king of the Greeks named Antiochos dwells, and to the north... [likewise] in the south, the Cholas and Pandyas as far as the Tamraparni [river] - and here, too, in the King's dominions - among the Greeks, Kambojas, the Nabhapantis of Nabhaka; among the Bhojas, Pitinikas, Andhras and Pulindas - everywhere they follow the instruction of His Sacred Majesty in the Law of Piety" (in Vincent Smith, 186).

The Comment here notes that the Nabhapantis have not been defined, that the Andhras are well known and then says, "The term Pulinda was used vaguely to denote wild hill-tribes. Here it probably refers to people like the Bhils in the Vindhya and Satpura hills" (188-9). "Pulindas" were also referred to in at least one of

the poems of the *Gatha Sattasai*, (700 poems), the famous early Maharashtri Prakrit collection supposedly written by King Hala of the Satavahanas:

*mahu-machiaaaii daTTh daTThaN muham piass  
suNoTTh*

*isaaluii pulindi rukkhcchaa-am gaa aNN* (#636)

"The Pulinda's jealous wife found his lip swollen,  
and not knowing he'd been stung, moved into the next  
trees shade" (Melhotra, 1991)

"While the Pulindas who live on the summits  
crouched with bows drawn,  
the pass of the mountains filled up  
with clouds resembling elephants" (Ray, 1990: 29).

Since the location of the *Gatha Sattasai* is primarily around the river Godavari, that is, northern Maharashtra, the Pulinda evidently could be located nearby.

"Pulindas" are also known from Greek sources. In an early text, the *Periplus*, a Greek text for traders and sailors written about the middle or second half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, there is a description of the port of Barygaza (Bharuch), which was a major trading centre of the time. According to it,

From Barygaza the coast immediately adjoining stretches from the north directly to the south and the country is therefore called Dakshinabades, because Dakhan in the language of the natives signifies south. Of this country that part which lies inland towards the east comprises a great space of desert country, and large mountains abounding with all kinds of wild animals, leopards,

tigers, elephants, huge snakes, hyenas and baboons of many different sorts, and is inhabited right across to the Ganges by many and extremely populous nations" (#50, Mazumdar, 1960: 304).

This describes the region now included in Maharashtra and parts of Andhra and Karnataka – with two important cities mentioned, south and east of Barygaza, Paethana (Paithan), and Tagara (not definitely identified). The Bhil territory though was north of this region – and the *Periplus* seems to be most oriented to trading and coastal areas.

*Bhils as 'Phyllitai'*

There is, however, a more direct mention of what appears to be the Bhils. Ptolemy's *Treatise on Geography*, written in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, gives (though the computations are erroneous) a good deal of information, and in the process mentions the Vindhya, the Narmada (Narmados) and Nanagouna rivers. Regarding the latter, it states,

About the Nanagouna [river] are the Phyllitai and the Bettigoi, including the Kandaloι along the country of the Phyllitai and the river, and the Ambastai along the country of the Bettigoi and the mountain range..." (#66, p. 374).

The Notes identify the Ambastai as the Ambashtas of Sanskrit literature and then argue, "The Phyllitai and the Kandaloι have to taken by some to denote the Bhils and the Gonds" (Mukherjee, p. 381). The Pulinda or Poulindai were identified separately by Ptolemy as a group inland and east of Barygaza (#63). They are also seen as separate from the Bhils by Oppert. They may very well have been a related group residing further south, south

of the Vindhyas and bordering on the Godavari. Thus, probably it is Ptolemy who gives us the first historical glimpse of Bhils.

*Bhils in History*

According to a recent study by Nandini Kapur, the Bhils have their first mention in Sanskrit literature in a text around the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, which mentions an elephant-riding Bhil chief barring the way to the Himalayas (Kapur, 2003: 144n). Kapur argues that the word "Bhil" was applied by outsiders, that it derives from a Dravidian word for bow, *vil*. From the beginning, thus, Bhils were renowned archers. From early medieval times they appear as dwellers in the forests and hills of Rajasthan, Gujarat and adjoining parts of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. They are thus the main forest-dwelling community of western India, comparable in numbers to the Gonds and Hos-Santals of central-eastern India. However, unlike these, they have lost their original language and now speak dialects of Marathi and Hindi.

During the feudal period, the Bhils were subordinated to a Rajput ruling class. Those who tended to get absorbed into the caste system did so via claims to be descended from Rajputs. Thus sections of "Bhilalas" got formed with this claim. In addition, Girasias and Kolis are caste-communities which are taken as intermediary groups, originating from Bhils and partially accepted as shudra cultivating castes. Bhils remained as hunters and shifting cultivators, sometimes providing soldiers for Rajput armies or serving as guardians of hill forts.

However, the relationship between Bhils and Rajputs is more complicated. There is a tradition even among Rajputs which points to the Bhils being the original possessors of most of the lands they claim. Stories among many Rajput clans of Bhils verifying

their kingship show this. For instance, according to Tod, the story of Goha, ancestor of the Sisodias, sees him as an adventurous and daring youth who used to go riding with the Bhils and became a favorite of theirs. One day the Bhils decided to "elect" a king and chose Goha; this choice was confirmed by the old chief of the Bhils. Later, Goha killed this man. Tod thus argues, from the Golden Bough traditions, that this goes back to the idea of a king winning his throne by slaying the previous king. (Cited Russell and Lal, 1916). Similarly, in other small states Bhils make a mark in blood on the forehead of a Rajput king at the time of his coronation.

There was thus a process by which some sections of the Bhil community got pulled into the caste order, particularly those who got some ratifications as chieftains or "respectable" castes. But it should also not be neglected that there must have been some clear resistance to this, on the part of the larger community. This resistance needs to be stressed and studied.

Towards the latter period of Mughal rule, especially at the time of the Maratha upsurge and the formation of regional kingdoms, Bhils also asserted their independence.

#### ***The Colonial Period and After***

By the time of the colonial period, the Bhils, dispossessed of much of their lands, had become either labourers and subordinates, or retreated further into the hills, often emerging as marauders, feared by the settled peasantry. During the Maratha period they engaged in constant uprisings against oppression, which continued against the British. Thus to the British, they were often and easily characterized as "criminal tribes" and bandits; in fact, as Waharu notes, they were "freedom fighters" for their own people.

The story of dispossession and revolt during the colonial period, of the formation of new classes and new movements, is a long one and will not be gone into here. Some activists during this period began to raise the demand for an independent "Bhilwara"; however, Bhils now became divided among four states – Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan – and three "standard" languages taught in the schools. The original Bhil language has been lost in obscurity.

### *Conclusion*

The use of the terminology of "tribal" to describe the adivasi communities of India takes them as something "primitive." It is sociologically erroneous as well as socially degrading.

Instead, we have argued here that Bhils can be looked upon as an ethnic group, with a particular language and culture. Emphasizing that the Bhils are an ethnic group and even a "nationality" implies that they have a history and an identity as a people, that they are not simply "primitive" peoples who will lose their essential characteristics if they become part of a modernized social order. As a people, they may modernize or change many of their social customs, dropping some, emphasizing others. They may choose different religions, develop their religious views. To activists like Wahanu Sonavane it is the collective characteristics and equality within the community, particularly in regard to women, that is most important. Such collective characteristics are at odds with some aspects of the contemporary capitalist order, particularly its free-wheeling individualism; yet they can be a source of strength if developed as part of an ownership pattern in which the land and forests are under control of the community. Developing these within the context of a modernizing society can be a major contribution of the communities we characterize as adivasis.

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